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Banned Books: A Reflection of Our Society

Course: Freedom of Expression (PMMA 5101)

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It would be absurd to think a book could cause riots. That would be a strange view of the world.

- Salman Rushdie, 1988

I remember when the *Twilight* book series by Stephenie Meyer started gaining traction as the film adaptation of the first novel was released in 2008. I was 14 years old and attending a private Evangelical Christian school at the time. My mom bought me the first book in the fantasy romance series and a classmate loaned me her copy of the second book shortly after. At some point during the 2008-2009 academic year, the school announced that the *Twilight* books were banned, and anyone caught reading them would receive detention. Nonetheless, my classmates continued sneakily reading the books during lunch time underneath the tables. I never really looked into why exactly the *Twilight* novels were a problem, especially since my parents never had an issue with me reading them. They weren't, as some religious schools claimed with the *Harry Potter* books, involving witchcraft ([Shiroma, 2013](#)), so what was the big deal? Little did I know that several schools and libraries around the country banned the *Twilight* series around that time, citing "sexually explicit [content], religious views, and being unsuitable for their age group," ([Reuters Staff, 2010](#)). The series came in at number five on the American Library Association's (ALA) list of most challenged books in 2009.

The ALA was founded in 1876 to not only support library services but also to ensure access to information of diversified viewpoints for all as promised by the First Amendment, regardless of personal opinion. The ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) keeps a record of all attempts to ban books, releasing an annual list of the most challenged works during National Library Week in April. A record-breaking number of books were challenged in 2022 ([Italie, 2023](#)). It begs the question, how can we as a nation with laws that protect our freedom to express ourselves, share creatively, and teach others what we believe in be okay with any kind of

literary censorship? Doesn't that go against the very freedoms that the First Amendment allows us? ALA President Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada states that book bans seek to "abolish free and equitable access to information. What that does is it erodes our country's commitment to the freedom of expression," ([NBC2 News, 2022](#)). From the early days of the printing press to recent book bans in US schools, censoring authors has become one of the largest indicators of where society stands on evolving cultural norms and their popularity.

With New Technology Come Rules and Great Responsibility

In 15th-century England, the invention of Johannes Gutenberg's printing press opened the door to the mass production of literature and other types of reading materials for public consumption. To regulate what was being printed, the clergy implemented a system of licensing in the 1500s. This required that all printing presses be approved by the crown, which led to a monopoly over publications in England. The Stationers' Company became the publishing police, granted with the power to "control the publication and distribution of 'seditious' and 'blasphemous' materials" (Tedford and Herbeck, 2017). By the Tudor period, the law required that all printers register their presses with the Stationers' Company, all printing be done in London, Oxford, or Cambridge, and special permission be received to add new master printers and printing apprentices. Queen Elizabeth I also authorized the Stationers' Company to search and seize any publications that were considered unlawful.

In volume four of the *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769) by Sir William Blackstone, he writes that "The liberty of the press is indeed essential to the nature of a free state: but this consists in laying no prior restraints upon publications, and not in freedom from censure for criminal matter when published," ([Zeigler, 2009](#)). Blackstone advocated for freedom

of expression and did not agree with the law's censoring of authors before a work could even be published:

Although Blackstone recognized the right of the government to punish “blasphemous, immoral, treasonable, schismatical, seditious or scandalous libels,” he also stood firmly in favor of an extensive freedom of the press and an absolute prohibition on prior restraint of publication ([Zeigler, 2009](#)).

Many others, including John Milton and John Locke, criticized the supervision of the presses in England (Atkinson and Fitzgerald, 2014). Licensing was abolished in the 18th century and replaced by the Statute of Anne (Tedford and Herbeck, 2017). Passed in 1710, the statute put copyright in the hands of authors rather than publishers and included provisions such as a requirement for publications to be submitted to public repositories.

American copyright law borrowed heavily from the Statute of Anne due to its democratic nature. The First Amendment restricted prior restraint, as “[t]he founding fathers viewed the practice of prior restraint as detrimental to democracy” ([Baracksky, 2009](#)). That did not, however, mean that everyone would be okay with simply anything that was published for public consumption.

The Banned and the Burned

Just as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (The Decameron) stirred up controversy in Europe in the mid-14th century ([Kerziouk, 2016](#)), many other publications continued to be problematic for certain groups of people regardless of the intricacies of the law. “Burning has been an effective way of destroying books throughout history,” notes Carolee Laine and Caren Town in *Book Banning and Other Forms of Censorship* (2017). They continue:

The practice traveled to America with English colonists in the 1600s and became firmly established in the United States. Puritan authorities in Massachusetts confiscated a religious pamphlet, which was condemned by the General Court. The public burning of this pamphlet in the Boston marketplace in 1650 is considered the first book burning in America (Laine and Town, 2017).

Fast forward to the 1870s, the rise of organizations such as the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the New England Watch and Ward Society became a staple for censoring content by burning or locking books away from the public ([Mass Moments](#)). It became a selling point for books, as they were labeled “Banned in Boston” on bookshelves in other major cities. Author Upton Sinclair joked, “I would rather be banned in Boston than read anywhere else because when you are banned in Boston, you are read everywhere else,” (Laine and Town, 2017). In the 1900s, parents became increasingly wary of the books their children were reading in schools. “A 1907 article in the Library Journal reported that Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) had been banned somewhere every year since its publication,” writes [Elizabeth Purdy \(2009\)](#). Twain’s novel was considered “racist, coarse, trashy, inelegant, irreligious, obsolete, inaccurate, and mindless,” ([Purdy, 2009](#)). Nonetheless, it was a bestseller due to its controversial subject matter.

On May 10th, 1933 in Nazi Germany, “university students burned upwards of 25,000 volumes of ‘un-German’ books, presaging an era of state censorship and control of culture,” ([United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)). The burnings were covered heavily by the press—nearly 100,000 people, the largest amount to that date, marched for six hours on May 10th, 1933 in New York City in protest of the events occurring in Germany. This was just the

beginning of a series of public burnings that took place in over 34 German university cities and towns:

The Nazi university student association created blacklists of works by literary and political figures such as Bertolt Brecht, Erich Maria Remarque, and Ernest Hemingway that were to be thrown into the flames. [...] Jewish authors numbered among the writers whose works were burned, among them some of the most famous contemporary writers of the day, such as Franz Werfel, Max Brod, and Stefan Zweig. Also among those works burned were the writings of beloved nineteenth-century German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, who wrote in his 1820–1821 play *Almansor* the famous admonition, “*Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen*”: “Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people.” Not all book burnings took place on May 10, as the German Student Association had planned. Some were postponed a few days because of rain. Others, based on local chapter preference, took place on June 21, the summer solstice, a traditional date for bonfire celebrations in Germany. In some cities, notably Berlin, radio broadcasts brought the speeches, songs, and ceremonial chants “live” to countless German listeners. The promotion of “Aryan” culture and the suppression of other forms of artistic production was yet another Nazi effort to “purify” Germany ([United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)).

In a word of warning, “American author Helen Keller—known for her socialist views and one of whose books was burned—wrote an open letter to German students, affirming the enduring power of ideas against tyranny,” ([United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)). The students did

not heed her warning, causing what is known as one of the most famous book-burning events in history.

Perhaps the 1933 case *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* brought some hope for books that had been burned and therefore banned in the 20th century. The United States Post Office (known then as the Post Office Department) burned copies of James Joyce's modernist novel *Ulysses* ([Murphy, 2016](#)) throughout the 1920s after an installment of the book in *The Little Review* literary magazine featuring a masturbation scene was deemed obscene by the New York Court of Special Session ([Stern, 2009](#)). In 1933, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Random House lawyer Morris Ernst (Whitman, 1976) helped challenge the obscenity ruling ([ACLU, 2010](#)). The courts agreed that the book did not "tend to promote lust," and that "[t]he erotic passages [in it] are submerged in the book as a whole and have little resultant effect" ([Stern, 2009](#)). This ruling allowed *Ulysses* to pass through U.S. Customs freely for those in America who wanted to read it without having to smuggle the book into the country under wraps.

Book Dilemmas of the '60s and '70s

The 1960s brought about some intense lawmaking due to events such as Penguin Publishing's re-release of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, first published in Florence, Italy in 1928. Known for its scandalous scenes, the 2001 edition of the book sheds some light on the drama that came from attempts to publish the book the way it was originally intended:

[Lawrence] was unable to secure commercial publication for the book in its unexpurgated form in either England or the United States (Secker, his English publisher, and Knopf, his American publisher, did issue an expurgated edition in 1932). [...] Though the first manuscript version of the story, which Lawrence had

written in 1927, was published in 1944 by the Dial Press, the unexpurgated 1928 version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not published legally in the United States until 1959, after the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York ruled that the book was not obscene and that the refusal of the postmaster general to deliver copies of the book through the mail violated the constitutional rights of Grove Press, which had published the book in April 1959. The unexpurgated edition of 1928 was not published in England until 1960, after Penguin Books triumphed in an obscenity trial there (Random House, Inc., 1993).

The trial in 1960 changed Britain forever. As the first work to be prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act 1959, it became a moment of national pride for the country. John Self writes,

During the trial, the experts called by the defence diligently defended Lawrence's reputation: comparing his book stylistically to the Bible; arguing for the "puritanical" quality of a description of "the weight of a man's balls"; and the Bishop of Woolwich, who was rebuked by the Archbishop of Canterbury afterwards, made the headline-grabbing statement that it was a book all Christians should read. Game to the end, the prosecution appealed to the jury – this populism echoes today – not to trust "the so-called experts" who had given evidence, but to apply "common sense" instead, via an insidious mistrust of the working classes: "Is that how the girls working in the factory are going to read this book?" Even the judge, Mr Justice Byrne, in his summing-up, tilted in this snobbish direction, saying the low price of the book meant it would "be available for all and sundry to read. ...You have to think of people with no literary background, with little or no learning." [...] But it was a doomed enterprise. It took just three hours for the jury

to unanimously find Penguin Books not guilty of an obscene publication. The judge, contrary to tradition, did not thank the jury afterwards. The verdict was out, the dam broken, and Penguin managed to get some copies on sale the same day, with two million copies sold nationwide a month later ([Self, 2020](#)).

Again, it seems that banning the book made it more popular. Everyone wanted to get their hands on a copy of a book that made literary history, and *Lady Chatterly's Lover* was definitely no exception.

Back in the 1930s, an independent bookseller in New York named Francis (Franny) Steloff smuggled copies of *Tropic of Cancer*—which was banned because of themes related to sexual morality—from its author Henry Miller in Paris. The book was sold at her Manhattan bookstore, Gotham Book Mart, which led to lawsuits. Steloff was known as a champion “of the experimental” and a challenger of censorship (Mitgang, 1989). She was not the only bookseller willing to keep the controversial book in stock—many other bookstores sold Miller’s novel under the table. By the 1960s, *Tropic of Cancer* had been involved in almost 100 court cases. In *Grove Press v. Gerstein* (1964), the Supreme Court ruled that the book was “not obscene because it had some redeeming social value” ([Flemming, 2009](#)). The literary merit of Miller’s work saved it from being constitutionally banned in the United States.

The 1960s and 70s continued to be an interesting time for book bans. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, released in 1960, was seen as controversial from the moment it entered the classroom curriculum in 1963. Racial slurs, profanity, and discussion of rape were a few of the reasons people felt uncomfortable about the book being taught in schools. “Chris Sergel, vice president of Dramatic Publishing, once acknowledged they receive many requests for specific words to be changed or removed [in *To Kill a Mockingbird*], but they’re always

denied them,” writes [Kenya Downs \(2016\)](#). Judy Blume’s racy 1975 novel *Forever* was challenged and still is banned from many schools due to topics of sex and birth control ([Crown, 2005](#)). The book was released just two years after *Roe v. Wade* was decided by the Supreme Court—many deemed it too soon for such a racy novel to be available to teens.

In 1976, Ohio’s Strongsville City School District was sued after the school board called for the removal of three satirical novels from the curriculum and school library, describing them as “completely sick” and “garbage” (Foerstel, 2006): *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, as well as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. The case, titled *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District*, was brought on by five high school students and their parents against the school district ([Hudson, 2009](#)). The plaintiffs argued that their First and Fourteenth Amendment rights were being violated by taking the books out of the curriculum and school library. While the court decided that the school board did not go against any constitutional rights or laws in removing the books from the curriculum, taking them out of the school library was indeed unconstitutional as the Sixth Circuit Court stated:

A library is a storehouse of knowledge. When created for a public school it is an important privilege created by the state for the benefit of students in the school. That privilege is not subject to being withdrawn by succeeding school boards whose members might desire to "winnow" the library for books the contents of which occasioned their displeasure or disapproval ([Koletsky, 1977](#)).

Although the books were still not allowed to be taught in the classroom, the court’s ruling saved the works from being banned from the school’s library, allowing students to read them at their leisure should they choose to do so.

From 1977-78, the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* caused quite a stir in Prince George's County, Maryland. A number of copies of the popular women's health book were available to borrow from the local public library, which angered the Coalition for Children. Due to the book's supposed encouragement of sexual acts through descriptions and illustrations, which the coalition claimed were "illegal in Maryland" as well as themes of lesbianism, birth control, and abortion, the group wanted it off of library bookshelves. The Coalition for Children tried to further their concern in a newsletter to the community by "print[ing] isolated quotes from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which, taken out of context, caused more members of the community to complain to [director of the library system] William Gordon (Foerstel, 2006). After much back and forth between the coalition and the county's library officials about the logistical nightmare that would come of attempts to sequester adult materials in the library to make them inaccessible to children, the concern over the book grew to include its availability at bookstores in the county. As if that wasn't outrageous enough, the coalition convinced the county's council members to introduce a bill titled, "An Act concerning Obscene Matter", to protect children from all types of harmful literature. The bill would make selling, lending, or displaying any type of material in which children could view pictures or photos of nudity or sexual acts a crime. The punishment would include a fine or jail time. This bill raised concerns about college students under 18 who would be exposed to nude art in university collections and doctors giving educational health pamphlets to teens. "Toby Rich, president of the Prince George's County Educators Association [at the time], said [the bill] amounted to bookburning," writes Herbert Foerstel in *Banned in the U.S.A.: A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries*. The bill did not pass, but this level of indignation when it came to banning books for the sake of protecting children from harmful content that many deemed equivalent to pornography was just beginning.

Crazy '80s

Starting in 1976, the Island Trees Union Free School District of Nassau County, Long Island in New York became embroiled in a book ban battle that lasted about seven years. It began when members of the school board decided to take a look at the district's library collections after attending a conference sponsored by Parents of New York United (PONYU) and receiving a list of books the organization considered to be objectionable due to sexual content, political views, or other reasons. The review resulted in the board's request for the removal of 11 books from the middle school and high school libraries in the district and, where applicable, from the curriculum. The eleven books were *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* by Alice Childress, *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, *Laughing Boy* by Oliver La Farge, *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* edited by Langston Hughes, *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud, *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris, *A Reader for Writers* edited by Jerome Archer, *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, and *Go Ask Alice*. Richard Morrow, Superintendent of Schools at the time, reprimanded the board for not following the proper policy in regard to book objections and furthermore, taking it upon themselves to call for the removal of the eleven books. A Book Review Committee was formed, a new superintendent took over after a year, and the incident became a major news story. Steven Pico, a student in the school district, filed a lawsuit against the school board, citing a violation of their First Amendment rights ([Desai, 2009](#)). The case went all the way up to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the First Amendment puts limitations on the power of school officials to remove literature from middle and high school libraries simply because of their subject matter. Several years after the 1982 *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* case, Steven Pico stated,

I could not believe the hypocrisy of the censorship of books in the United States.

In school, year after year, I had been told how books were banned in communist countries and burned in Nazi Germany. I could not believe that it was happening in the United States in the 1970s [...] I found it hard to believe that students didn't care and that every single teacher remained silent. For the first time in my life I felt that I understood what happened during the McCarthy era. [...] Not one parent in Island Trees ever complained about these eleven books. Not one teacher, not one student ever objected to these books. A group of activists from around the country ... succeed in keeping these books off the shelves for seven years [...] What I shall never forget is the silence of my teachers during the book banning. Only one of my teachers ever commented to me about the book banning ... One day after class she whispered to me, "Steve, you're doing the right thing." I will never be able to forget that she felt the need to whisper (Foerstel, 2006).

While the books that the school board wanted to remove from the school libraries and curriculum included highly-revered and award-winning novels, they chose to focus on minute details that weren't aligned with their idea of appropriateness in order to control what students could read for over half a decade. Had Pico not stood up for the rights of his fellow classmates, it is possible that the books might have continued being banned, especially since the teachers seemed too afraid of the school board to advocate for their students' First Amendment freedom.

Throughout the 1980s, book bans continued to be a hot topic. As Blume mentions in a documentary released in April of 2023 titled, *Judy Blume Forever*, "After the presidential election of 1980, overnight, the censors came out of the woodwork and burst onto the stage. It was like [the censors were saying] 'It's our turn now, and we are going to tell you not just what

our kids can't read, but what all kids can't read'" ([Pardo and Wolchok, 2023](#)). Among Blume's novels, which resonated with preteens and teenagers due to relatability, books such as *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and even dictionaries were being removed from libraries around the United States. *Judy Blume Forever* shows archival footage of Blume's 1984 appearance on the debate-style television show *Crossfire* with paleoconservative commentator Pat Buchanan, which paints a picture of the tunnel vision leading to the banning of several books that decade:

Pat Buchanan: What is this preoccupation with sex in books for 10-year-olds? I looked at several of these [books], Mrs. Blume, and one of them talks about masturbation. Another one talks about a little boy who is window-peeping on his neighbor—a little girl. The other one talks about somebody throwing up.

Judy Blume: Throwing up is sex?

Buchanan: Well it has to do with bodily functions. What is all this doing in a book for 10-year-olds?

Blume: There is no preoccupation with it. Did you read the whole book or did you just read pages that were paperclipped?

Buchanan: Why can't you write an interesting and exciting book for 10-year-olds without getting into discussion of masturbation?

Blume: *Deenie* is not about masturbation. It's about a girl with scoliosis. Are you hung up about masturbation?

Buchanan (shouting): You are! You are hung up about this stuff! ([Pardo and Wolchok, 2023](#)).

The inability to see value in books like *Deenie* and others that were being challenged in the 1980s became very common, to the detriment of the pre-teens and teenagers who were losing

access to the information and viewpoints authors were trying to provide them. Censors were increasingly becoming obsessed with small details in books, such as masturbation—a topic appropriate for teenagers, yet they were barred from reading about it— completely disregarding the larger purpose of the work and its literary merit. Additional archival footage in *Judy Blume Forever* shows Blume in an interview in the 1980s responding to a question about how it makes her feel when she finds out her books are being banned. “It makes me crazy mad,” she told the interviewer. “I think kids have a right to read, they have a right to know, and they have the right to get honest answers to their questions, and banning a book isn’t going to change any of that,” she continued. The documentary also features an archival clip of a teenage student named Maggie Smith echoing Blume’s sentiment, stating, “My parents have a right to tell me what I can read but somebody else’s parents do not have a right to tell me what I can read.” Like the students in *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District* and *Island Trees v. Pico*, it appears that many children were becoming equally upset over the idea that some parents and board members were allowed influence jurisdiction over the kinds of books that all kids were permitted to read.

The outrage over certain books being allowed in libraries was heard in town hall meetings, school board meetings, and even by publishing houses throughout the 1980s. In *Judy Blume Forever*, book publisher and author Beverly Horowitz states that she “used to get the hate phone calls. ‘Hello, I’m calling about such and such a book by Judy Blume. Do you know what’s in that book?’” she recounted. “‘Why indeed I do, we published that book. The best thing I can say to you is that the First Amendment allows us to publish this book and it can appear anywhere,’” she remembers telling the person on the other line. Concern ran so deep that “in the 1980s, conservative warriors Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell made [*Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret.*] and other Blume books a target of their ire. Schlafly’s Eagle Forum put out a

pamphlet titled “How to Rid Your Schools and Libraries of Judy Blume Books”,” ([Weiss, 2023](#)).

The censors began to hate not only the books they were trying to challenge and/or ban, but the authors who wrote them as well. Blume remembers receiving 700 death threats in one day because of her support of Planned Parenthood. She became increasingly worried that she might be shot at by an angry parent at a book signing or other public event with a large audience in attendance ([Pardo and Wolchok, 2023](#)). It seems that not only the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech was being disregarded, but also an individual’s freedom to have personal views and support organizations that share said views.

Going Back in Time?

Blume’s publishers took it upon themselves to warn her about using certain language in her books, but ultimately left it up to her to decide if she wanted to censor herself. In *Judy Blume Forever*, Blume remembers being asked if she wanted to keep the word “fucking” on one of the pages of her 1993 young adult novel *Here's to You, Rachel Robinson*. The word is said in a bit of dialogue from the main character’s younger brother. She decides not to censor herself after her adult son reminds her that, “she is Judy Blume,” and should therefore stay honest and true to herself and her readers ([Pardo and Wolchok, 2023](#)). Blume goes on to mention in the documentary that teenagers reading *Here's to You, Rachel Robinson* probably say similar curse words all the time while around their friends, so it would be silly to care about whether or not her book has one curse word in it. Silly indeed, especially in 1993 when prior restraint no longer existed, but many censors probably wished it still did.

[According to the ALA](#), parents were the most likely group to challenge books from 1990-2009. The most popular reasons for banning include unsuitability to age group, violence, homosexuality, offensive language, and too much sex. In recent years, books such as *Looking for*

Alaska by John Green, the *Alice* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James, have been criticized by religious groups, boycotted by international organizations, and challenged by library boards ([American Library Association](#)). In 2021, a group called Moms for Liberty was formed to advocate for parental rights over the books that are being taught in classrooms and available in school libraries. The group has 275 chapters in 45 states across the U.S. and a total of over 115,000 members ([CBS, 2023](#)). In an interview with Moms for Liberty co-founders Tiffany Justice and Tina Descovich, CBS Sunday Morning Correspondent Martha Teichner asks them, “What kinds of books do you want in schools? In libraries?” Descovich responded, “Books that educate children.” Teichner noted that the response was too much of a generalization, so Justice chimed in, stating, “Books that don't have pornography in them. Let's start there. Let's just put the bar really really low. Books that don't have incest, pedophilia, rape...” ([CBS, 2023](#)). The problem with this “low bar” that Justice speaks of is that Moms for Liberty, as do other censors, fail to see the literary merit in books they are trying to ban when they find one small detail in them that doesn't sit well with them. They also tend to consider children's books that contain themes of LGBTQ+ identities to be sexually explicit, which they are not ([Winter, 2022](#)). Moms for Liberty is causing all kinds of trouble on school boards, as they are actively electing conservative board members to advance their agenda and therefore violate students' First Amendment rights ([Renshaw, and Oliphant, 2023](#)).

Teachers are becoming increasingly tired of the battlefield that has become the classroom. The Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District of Grapevine, Texas is seeing a 40 percent increase in teacher retirements and resignations due to censorship of books in school curricula. “This community has continuously harassed me for the past few years to the point where I didn't even want to be alive anymore, much less be a teacher,” said Emily Ramser, a

high school English teacher in the district who identifies as queer, through tears ([NBC, 2023](#)). She was asked to modify her lessons, told to remove colorful rainbow-like decor from her classroom, and was even accused of influencing a student to become transgender simply because she loaned the student a graphic novel called *The Prince and the Dressmaker* by Jen Wang (an accusation that turned out to be false). Ramser announced her resignation during her Outstanding Educator Award acceptance speech. Losing outstanding educators like Ramser is having damaging effects on students all around the country. Not only are students losing their First Amendment right to access information, but also high-quality educators due to school board members removing hundreds of books featuring content about “race, gender, and LGBTQ identities” ([NBC, 2023](#)). “We’re in a battle against the school board when the school board should be on our side,” said a student in the district ([NBC, 2023](#)). Who then, are the censors *really* protecting if students are being double whammied in this manner?

Some students, however, are beginning to agree with bans on certain subject matter, such as race, being taught in schools through literature. Recently, a student in a South Carolina classroom felt that being assigned *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates for AP Language Arts along with supporting videos about racism was crossing a line, as they wrote:

Hearing [my teacher’s] opinion and watching these videos made me feel uncomfortable. I actually felt ashamed to be Caucasian ... These videos portrayed an inaccurate description of life from past centuries that she is trying to resurface. I don’t feel as though it is right because these videos showed antiquated history. I understand in AP Lang, we are learning to develop an argument and have evidence to support it, yet this topic is too heavy to discuss ([Jones, 2023](#)).

Another student in the class wrote that “a teacher talking about systemic racism is illegal in South Carolina” ([Jones, 2023](#)) which, it apparently is. The state does not allow the teaching of race, sex, or oppression in schools (or in any institution that uses state money to operate) in a way that makes an individual feel uncomfortable or guilty. Needless to say, the AP Language lesson using *Between the World and Me* was cut short by the district. In a similar vein, the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, a book about the Holocaust, was removed from McMinn County Schools in Tennessee. The reason? Violence, profanity, and one drawing on one page showing a woman’s bare chest ([CBS, 2023](#)). Completely disregarding the historical content in the graphic novel, it is now no longer available to students in the district. State laws and bans like these make it difficult to teach important topics in English and history classes. It’s almost as if, by banning these books and lessons, school boards are trying to erase historical facts just because the works contain viewpoints that are different than their own or feature what they consider to be “harmful” content.

Public libraries are feeling the burn, too, especially now that the 2024 election is on the horizon. Even though public libraries have designated sections for adult content that is clearly not appropriate for children, politicians in conservative states around the country feel the need to limit minors' access to what they consider to be explicit material, namely books with LGBTQ+ themes. A bill in Louisiana “would require public libraries to create a card system that would prevent children from checking out “sexually explicit material” unless they have parental approval. Additionally, the bill would allow parents to bring books they feel are inappropriate to a local board for review of the material” ([Cline, 2023](#)). Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry claims the bill is only trying to make sure librarians are being mindful of what books are being added to the children’s section, but what it really does is prevent material about sexual identity

from being available to minors. President of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians Amanda Jones states that she's "been disheartened to see people in our state paint an inaccurate portrait of and disinformation about our state's libraries. We have never had an issue with our libraries until they started being used for political gain," ([Cline, 2023](#)). Book bans and challenges have become one of the most popular topics surrounding Republican campaigns, and politicians show no signs of stopping their continued attacks on literature written for children.

What is it, though, that these groups are trying to accomplish in shielding children from these books? Is it sex shame? Fear they will be hated by their children for their family's racist beliefs? Despite the book bans, many are finding the works being shielded from children to be enriching. As Twitter user [@capricornmathlv](#) states:

Two of my nephews who are A students in high school only used to read what was assigned. Making such a big deal about banned bks, my nephews asked to read them. Their parents allowed me to purchase many of the banned bks for them to read. [...] My nephews' parents, as well as me, don't intend to allow our children to grow up being ignorant of history, of life, or of different people who deserve love and equality as well. My family is on a mission to make sure our children know truth. [...] Normally, I probably would not have read many of these particular banned books. It's been really nice discussing history and the many different wonderful people of this world with my nieces, nephews, and even my adult children ([Joyful, 2023](#)).

Almost as if the "Banned in Boston" trend has returned, libraries and bookstores around the country tout Banned Book shelves, making it easy to pick up banned reads. A Barnes & Noble bookstore in Austin, Texas proudly showcases several banned children's books with cards

beneath them explaining the reasons they were banned ([Hurley, 2023](#)). The Chicago Public Library has a display of banned books in what CBS correspondent Martha Teichner considers a “defiance of banned books” ([CBS, 2023](#)). In an even bigger defiance of banned books, Margaret Atwood’s symbolic move to create an unburnable version of her frequently banned dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* ([Kennedy, 2022](#)) is sadly a very real precaution we might need to begin taking.

Overall, it seems that in many ways we have gone back in time. The Republican party’s radical efforts to remove literature that “expose children to what they call pornographic material and diverse perspectives on race, gender and sexuality” ([PBS NewsHour, 2023](#)), as well as violence ([PEN America, 2023](#)), from classrooms and libraries, harkens back to the Reagan era. “It’s shocking that this is going on just as if time stood still and we’re back in the 80s,” says author Judy Blume ([Pardo and Wolchok, 2023](#)). Librarians are being threatened with bills that will allow the withholding of funds from state libraries if they don’t obey book bans ([Cline, 2023](#)). Bans on books such as Amanda Goreman’s inauguration poem “The Hill We Climb” (cited for hate messages and critical race theory), *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe (banned due to LGBTQ+ themes), and others ([PEN America, 2023](#)) are a reflection of the current state of our society. “If you want to know where we are as a country—you want to know what conversations are bubbling, or where our disputes are, where we’re at odds, look at the banned books list. We don’t want to talk about race. We still can’t do it and that’s why these books are on the banned list,” says Jason Reynolds, one of the authors of the frequently banned book about police brutality *All American Boys* ([Pardo and Wolchok, 2023](#)). The most recent list of banned books shows us that we’re also unable to talk about sexuality in a way that is healthy for our nation and the youngsters that are growing up in it.

Maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel. Illinois recently became the first state to make banning books a criminal offense ([Mayorquin, 2023](#)). Plus, it seems that the Republican party isn't completely on board with banning books, as an Ipsos/NPR poll revealed—only 35% of Republicans support it ([Turner, 2023](#)). As the next election cycle approaches, it will be interesting to see what comes of attempts to ban books in America and how the people interpret the challenges to said books.

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